

## **Breast Density: What Does It Mean?**

Dense breasts have less fatty tissue and more non-fatty tissue compared to breasts that aren't dense. Dense breasts have more gland tissue that makes and drains milk, as well as supportive tissue (called stroma) that surrounds the gland. Breast density can be inherited, so if your mother has dense breasts, it's likely you will, too.

## **How Do I Know If I Have Dense Breasts?**

One way to measure breast density is the thickness of tissue on a mammogram.

The Breast Imaging Reporting and Database Systems, or BI-RADS, which reports the findings of mammograms, also includes an assessment of breast density.

BI-RADS classifies breast density into four groups:

- **Mostly fatty:** The breasts are made up of mostly fat and contain little fibrous and glandular tissue. This means the mammogram would likely show anything that was abnormal.
- **Scattered density:** The breasts have quite a bit of fat, but there are a few areas of fibrous and glandular tissue.
- **Consistent density:** The breasts have many areas of fibrous and glandular tissue that are evenly distributed throughout the breasts. This can make it hard to see small masses in the breast.
- **Extremely dense:** The breasts have a lot of fibrous and glandular tissue. This may make it hard to see a cancer on a mammogram because the cancer can blend in with the normal tissue.

Still, no one method of measuring breast density has been agreed upon by doctors. Breast density is not based on how your breasts feel during your self-exam or your doctor's physical exam.

## **Why Do I Need to Know My Breast Density?**

Research has shown that dense breasts:

- can be 6 times more likely to develop cancer
- can make it harder for mammograms to detect breast cancer; breast cancers (which look white like breast gland tissue) are easier to see on a mammogram when they're surrounded by fatty tissue (which looks dark)

Research suggests that about 43% of women ages 40 to 74 years old in the United States have dense breasts.

As of August 1, 2017, 30 states have passed legislation requiring that women be notified of their breast density with mammography results.

## **What If I Don't Understand My Breast Density Notification Letter?**

Because the words used in most breast density notification letters are dictated by state law, many people find the letters difficult to understand. If you receive a letter that talks about your breast density and you don't understand it, call your doctor's office and ask someone there to help you interpret the letter.

## **If I Have Dense Breasts, Do I Need a Different Breast Cancer Screening Plan?**

If you have dense breasts, you have a higher than average risk of breast cancer. So you and your doctor need to develop a screening plan tailored to your unique situation. General recommended screening guidelines include:

- a monthly breast self-exam
- a yearly breast exam by your doctor
- a digital mammogram every year starting at age 40

Digital mammography is better than film mammography in women with dense breasts, regardless of age.

Your personal screening plan also may include the following tests to detect any cancer as early as possible:

- MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) of the breast
- ultrasound

Talk to your doctor about developing a specialized program for early detection that meets your individual needs and gives you peace of mind.

To get the best information from your breast imaging tests, it's important to compare this year's results to results from prior years and to correlate the information from the various imaging tests (what you feel in the breast compared to the results of your mammogram, MRI, and ultrasound).

Usually test reports will say if the most recent results are different from other test results or earlier results from the same test. It's a good idea to get a copy of each breast imaging report and put them in a binder. This keeps you in the loop and reduces the risk of someone missing an important finding.

